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Implementing Mindfulness to Promote Mental Health in Elementary School Classrooms

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LS 400

Professor Paoze Thao

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Abstract

The practice of mindfulness has been around for thousands of years, however; the practice has just become more common in the Western world, and especially in the classroom. The purpose of this paper is to discover how implementing mindfulness promotes mental health in elementary school students. In order to find out just how mindfulness promotes mental health in the elementary classroom, the research that was done involved an extensive literature review on the topic of mindfulness, surveys and interviews with local teachers in the Tri-County area, and also reached out to teachers to be interviewed more in depth. The results found that mindfulness does in fact promote elementary students' mental health in a variety of ways, e.g. self-regulation, empathy, focus, calmness, and so on. Though there is more research to be done on this topic in the long term, this study along with many others show the potential benefits for elementary students now and potentially in the future.

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Introduction and Background

School can be a wonderful place where children can learn about new topics, share their own ideas, find their passions and continue to grow their understanding of the world around them. However, with test taking, state and federal government standards for public schools, homework, extracurricular activities, among other daily stressors, it can also be a place that can be very stressful for both students and teachers. Unfortunately, schools today are faced with not only a need to greatly improve academic achievement, but to also make sure that a child's emotional and social needs are met at the same time without enough resources (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). One teacher, Jean-Gabrielle Larochette, who works in a low-income school district and was interviewed by Schwartz (2014), puts it perfectly:

Before we can teach a kid how to academically excel in school, we need to teach him how to have stillness, pay attention, stay on task, regulate, make good choices. We tell kids be quiet, calm yourself down, be still. We tell them all these things they need in the classroom, but we're not teaching them how to do that (p. 1).

Mindfulness is a way that both students and teachers can take a moment in the day for themselves to become aware of their breath, their thoughts, their emotions, and their body.

"Mindfulness practices center on awareness of the mind, body and emotions and hence the development of the whole person" (Ager et al., 2015, p. 897). Though research on mindfulness in the classroom is relatively new, the practice of mindfulness itself has been around for thousands of years.

Mindfulness itself is considered to be primarily a Buddhist practice and is one of the core teachings of Buddha. However, mindfulness in itself is not a belief or ideology, it is something that can be used by anyone who seeks its benefits. The practice of mindfulness itself is inherently human, anyone can be mindful on a moment-to-moment basis. The part that makes it a Buddhist

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practice is applying it to all aspects of your life, not just certain moments. However, in the last 40 years, Buddhist traditions like mindfulness have become more present in Western civilization and thus, in classrooms (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

The primary question that this research paper strives to answer is: How does implementing mindfulness promote mental health for elementary school students? The secondary questions that this research paper will also strive to answer are: Are there any benefits of mindfulness to promote mental health for elementary school students overall? If so, what are they? Are there any schools in the Tri-County area that implement the concept of mindfulness in the classroom? If there are, how do teachers implement it? Could mindfulness relieve stress in terms of test taking for students according to teachers? What could teachers do to promote more mindfulness activities in their classroom, so that their students will have a healthier mindset? In other words, are there resources for teachers to implement those activities in class? The reason these questions have been picked in this research paper the fact that school has become so stressful for students, and there should be time taken out of the day to focus on a child's mental well-being. If this paper finds positive outcomes from using mindfulness it could be very valuable in the day-to-day routines inside an elementary school classroom, and students will know exactly how to best deal with issues they are struggling with, if they understand how they are feeling moment-to-moment.

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Literature Review

As mentioned before, mindfulness as a practice has been around for over thousands of years, dating back to its use in Buddhist practices, and has only recently started being practiced by Western civilization in the past 40 years; that's not to say that mindfulness is not inherently already human, it can be practiced by anyone, at any time and does not belong to one religious or philosophical practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBI) have become very popular within the past few years. According to Zenner et al. (2014), it was originally introduced about 40 years ago by Jon Kabat-Zinn in clinical research and practice through Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program (MBSR). After finding several benefits through MBIs for adults, there began the desire to see how it impacted children, and thus began the research on mindfulness in the classroom (Zenner et al., 2014). However, there are those researching the topic of mindfulness who believe that there is still not enough hard data on exactly how mindfulness benefits those students whose teachers practice it in their elementary school program.

Weijer -Bergsma et al. (2012) argues that most of the studies that have been done on mindfulness-based intervention were focused on those children with clinical symptoms or clinical referrals, such as ADHD, autism, or anxiety. Not only that, but the studies that have been done on all children in the classroom needed parental approval in order for the children to take part in the mindfulness-based intervention, and thus only certain children were getting the opportunity to participate in those studies, which ultimately, they believed skewed the results. Finally, Weijer-Bergsma et al. (2012) believed that there were not enough studies done that

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focused on long-term effects on students with mindfulness-based intervention which means that a lot of the benefits of mindfulness remain unknown.

Much of the literature around the subject of mindfulness in elementary school classrooms revolves around the social and emotional development of children, the students' focus during class time, as well as on how it impacts the stress that children feel at school on a day-to-day basis. In terms of social and emotional development for children, there is a subcategory of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) entitled, Mindfulness-Based Social and Emotional Learning (MBSEL). In these studies on this subcategory specifically, mindfulness has been shown to reduce stress and promote self-regulation skills. However, researchers who worked on this study also argue that there is again a focus on clinical populations instead of in a traditional classroom settings, so the data does not represent the entire population of the classroom. They believe the reason for these limitations is due to the fact that there is a need to train teachers about the methods of implementing mindfulness into their curriculum (Bakosh et al., 2016).

Another study that was done that focused on SEL programs in schools that involved mindfulness found a variety of positive effects on students as well. Not only did students show reduced stress in the classroom, but they were also showing more empathy and showed increased peer acceptance within the classroom. They argued in this study that not only are students being held to a certain standard for academic success in school, but schools, districts, and policymakers seem to be more concerned with students' social and emotional development, however they also argue that there are already limited resources to tackle either of these desires that come from schools, districts, and policymakers (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Vickery and Dorjee (2016)

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state that research that has already been done on the development of a child's emotional and social well-being greatly impacts their mental and physical health, all the way from academic prospects to the quality of their adult life. This shows that these SEL programs, which include mindfulness-based practices, can have a great impact on a child's development. Here is one of the quotes that really stands out in this study:

Mindfulness promotes the cultivation of a less automatic mode of mind, enhances awareness of internal processes and reduces reactive patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving (Vickrey & Dorjee, 2016, p. 2).

For children to be successful, educators and administrators should not just focus on a child's academic success. Diamond (2010) says that educators must focus on the whole child, which includes their mental and emotional well-being:

It all comes back to the importance of action for learning and the fundamental interrelatedness of the different parts of the human being (the social, emotional, cognitive, and physical parts) and of all human beings to one another. Academic achievement, social-emotional competence, and physical and mental health are fundamentally and multiply interrelated. The best and most efficient way to foster any one of those (such as academic achievement) is to foster all of them (p. 798).

There are also some opposing views to teaching mindfulness in the classroom. Some people argue that mindfulness meditation is a Buddhist practice, and therefore is unconstitutional because it is forcing religious beliefs on their students (Hignett, 2018). Some however, argue that mindfulness can be secular and not religious at all (Brown, 2019). However, others argue against that and say that you cannot teach mindfulness without some religious aspect involved in it (Brown, 2019). There is also opposition with research that has been done in the classroom on mindfulness. Turner (2017) states that some argue that while research is promising, enthusiasm on the research that has been done is a bit premature. There is also the issue that much of the

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research that has been done contains small sample sizes, no random or active controls, which are known and effective treatments, and the research is also sometimes based on self-report data, or how the practice impacts the researcher (Brown, 2019). Obviously, there is still much research that needs to be done on mindfulness on how it is being used in the classroom to see how it truly impacts children.

It appears that, for students to succeed, they need to be provided with a healthy brain that can regulate their emotions, teach them to enjoy stillness, and take a moment to refocus themselves. This paper aims to take the research that was done in the past and expand upon it further, in hopes to find some new information that could continue to prove the benefits of mindfulness in the classroom and whether or not it promotes mental health. While time is limited during the research process for this paper in particular, it seems as though the next step would be to look at how mindfulness impacts students over a longer period of time.

Method and Procedures

The research that needed to be done for this senior capstone project involved reaching out to teachers, sending out surveys and interview requests for their participation in this research, as well as studying the literature that was already done on the subject of mindfulness. Teachers were involved in this study since they were the ones conducting mindfulness in the classroom, so they would know best how using mindfulness in the classroom would impact their students' mental well-being. Peer-reviewed literature was used due to the fact that so much of the research

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done is fairly recent, although limited since mindfulness is something that has only recently been introduced and studied within the classroom.

In total, over 50 teachers were contacted and requested to take the survey on mindfulness (See Appendix A) and a total of 20 teachers were requested to be interviewed in further detail on the topic of how mindfulness impacts the mental health of elementary school students with the same questions reflected in Appendix A. On top of that, many journal articles were considered in order to seek the answers to the secondary or related research questions that were posed on the topic of mindfulness in the Introduction and Background section.

In order to find teachers to survey, research was done to see if their emails were available online, since the survey was done on Google Forms, the most logical way of communication was through email. Once the school websites were researched and the teachers' emails were not able to be located, the principal was reached out to instead to see if they might send out the email with the link to the survey to their teachers. If a generally positive response from the survey was received, the teacher who took the survey was reached out to in order to see if they would be willing to be interviewed in greater detail, using the same questions from the survey (See Appendix A).

Results and Findings

This section covers the findings for the research questions that were brought up in the Introduction and Background section of this research paper. This information was gathered from the surveys that were distributed, teachers interviewed, as well as, peer-reviewed literature that has already discussed the subjects brought up in these questions.

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Are there any benefits of mindfulness to promote mental health for elementary school students overall? If so, what are they?

Many of the teachers who responded to the survey were asked about what was the greatest benefit they noticed in their students since implementing mindfulness in the classroom. Many of the responses mentioned that the students are able to calm down and are ready to focus. One teacher even mentioned that it helps them prepare to learn. They also mentioned that the students are more attentive during class time and the energy in the room is much more calm (Survey respondents, personal communication, October 15, 2019). Mindfulness has been shown to reduce the negative aspects of stress (Bigel et al., 2009) which is a major issue within schools across the country. Not only that but teachers who responded to this survey also mentioned that it helps them regulate their emotions and how they are feeling much more easily and by being able to do that, they have a “readiness to learn” (Bakosh et al., 2016, p. 3). Overall, mindfulness has been shown to help the following, according to Bellinger et al. (2015):

Mindfulness is associated with reduced stress, stress reactivity, and chronic pain as well as decreased anxiety and depression. Mindfulness is also associated with improved cognitive control abilities, as evidenced by measures of self-regulation, attention, and working memory (p. 123).

Those benefits listed above are what have been found throughout the limited research done on this topic. Self-regulation seems to be a big outcome when using mindfulness as well as attention based on the results from the survey sent to the teachers (See Appendix A) as well as research that has already been done on this subject.

Are there any schools in the Tri-County area that implement the concept of mindfulness in the classroom? If there are, how do teachers implement it?

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One question that was asked in the survey was “Have you ever had professional development regarding using mindfulness in your classroom? If so, could you tell me more about that?” (See Appendix A). It turns out that fourteen of the twenty-one teachers who responded to this survey (about 67% of the teachers surveyed) have had district-wide professional development on the topic of mindfulness for almost three years now (Survey respondents, personal communication, October 15, 2019). Some teachers from other districts mentioned that they had the Mindful Life Project was brought to their schools for mindfulness training as well. Mindful Life Project’s mission statement is: Empower underserved children through mindfulness and other transformative skills to gain self-awareness, confidence, self-regulation and resilience, leading to lifelong success” (Mindful Life Project.org, 2018).

Teachers use apps, books, websites, as well as the professional development they have had in order to implement mindfulness in their classroom. They use these resources to help students at the start of their day with mindfulness, or after recess and lunch to get the children refocused.

Could mindfulness relieve stress in terms of test taking for students according to teachers?

In the survey, the teachers were asked “Do you believe that mindfulness helps relieve the stress of test taking for your students?” Twelve out of twenty-one teachers responded that they were unsure if mindfulness helps their students with stress before test taking. None of the teachers responded “no” that it did not help relieve stress with test taking, and nine of the twenty-one teachers have observed that it has relieved stress in terms of test taking (Survey respondents, personal communication, October 15, 2019). It is obvious that there is not enough

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knowledge through this study to provide sufficient evidence that mindfulness does help with stress before a test. Perhaps more research should be done by doing specific research on this topic by performing mindfulness before test taking and analyzing the results. There have been studies done, however, on how mindfulness improved students' grades using MBSL programs that were mentioned in the literature review, so there seems to be potential in this area if more research is done on this topic specifically (Bakosh et al., 2016).

What could teachers do to promote more mindfulness activities in their classroom, so that their students will have a healthier mindset? In other words, are there resources for teachers to implement those activities in class?

According to the survey it seems as though more and more teachers are getting professional development on the subject of mindfulness (Survey respondents, personal communication, October 15, 2019). However, Teacher A, who was personally interviewed, mentioned that even though the professional development is offered to their district, the teachers have to be willing and interested to implement mindfulness into their classroom. According to Teacher A, it is not something that can be done once and something the teacher moves on from, it has to be a constant practice in their life (Teacher A, personal communication, November 4, 2019).

Teacher A also talked about a professional development workshop that they are working on themselves. They said that a lot of teachers feel overwhelmed during the day trying to stay on track with their students, so a lot of the time teachers feel as though they do not have time to add mindfulness to their routine as well. Teacher A's professional development is focusing on how

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teachers can easily implement it throughout their curriculum so it does not have to feel like this overwhelming task (Teacher A, personal communication, November 4, 2019).

Many of the teachers who were surveyed also responded with books, websites, and so on that they use to practice mindfulness in their classroom each day. Websites such as Class Dojo, can be used in the classroom to teach children about mindfulness, which uses cartoon monsters to explain difficult concepts that the child may not otherwise understand or be very engaged with. Websites like these help get children interested in practicing mindfulness each day. There are also a variety of apps like Calm or Insight Timer that teachers can use for guided mindfulness practice in the classroom, that are used for a quick mindfulness session after lunch or recess to get the children focused back on their schoolwork (Survey respondents, personal communication, October 15, 2019).

Discussion

Though research is limited and they are still developing data on the benefits of mindfulness in the classroom; I believe that it is clear that mindfulness only provides both students and teachers with benefits in their day-to-day lives. When I started this project my idea of “mental health” was focused more on how it impacted mental illnesses such as depression or anxiety but mental health can cover so much more than that. It is about how the child is regulating their feelings, about how they are able to calm down after getting worked up emotionally or on the playground. It is about self-care in the sense that you are taking a moment out of the day for yourself, to check and see how your mind and body are feeling. If they develop these skills at an early age, I believe that if they are ever diagnosed with things like anxiety and

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depression in the future or as a child, they will be more prepared to take on those challenges by having grown up in the classroom using mindfulness, and will have a better understanding of what their bodies and minds need when facing these challenges.

Seeing the benefits that other teachers and researchers have shown throughout their own investigation of implementing mindfulness in the classroom, I look forward to implementing it in my own classroom. I think the lessons that children learn through mindfulness are invaluable and will help them as they develop and throughout the rest of their lives. I hope that in the future more research will be done on the long term effects of mindfulness to see how it benefits children over the years of their development, since they have had so much success with research done on adults. I think that mindfulness can only help children as they navigate the excitement and stressors of school life.

Problems and Limitations

I had a few setbacks while conducting my research for my capstone paper. The first being that there has been little research done on this topic. The research being done on this topic is new within the past twenty to thirty years, so a lot of the research that was done in the past talked about how there needs to be a longer study done to truly see the effects of the use of mindfulness in the classroom and how it impacts a child's development over time. However, the one benefit to this is that because the research has only been done in the past thirty years, all the research that was found is obviously relatively recent and dependable.

The other setback I found was the amount of time I had given myself to do research and collect data. I believe that it made it more difficult for me to be able to interview teachers. I set

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out to interview ten teachers who practice mindfulness in their classrooms. In the end, I only heard back from one teacher that I was able to interview. Luckily for me, Teacher A had a wealth of information for me, so I was excited that I was able to interview at least one teacher. I think overall though I received a lot of information through the survey, which I sent out to over fifty teachers and received twenty-one responses, which in a way made up for the lack of interviews since teachers were so responsive to that.

Overall, I believe that I had sufficient data to answer most of my secondary research or related questions. However, I think that, in order to seek the answer to my secondary or related research question about whether mindfulness benefits a student's stress before test taking or not, I would need to do a trial run within a classroom to see if it truly impacts students' stress levels when taking a test. Perhaps that is research I could do down the line within my own classroom to see if there are any major impacts on test taking.

Recommendation

Based on the findings of this senior capstone research project, implementing mindfulness indeed promotes mental health in elementary school students. Therefore teachers should try to implement it in their classroom. It does not have to be long, perhaps for just five minutes a day, either after lunch or recess and see how students respond to these practices each day. If teachers are unsure about where to look for resources they could just search with Google. There are dozens of free resources that they could use in their classrooms. These resources are available through programs that teachers are already using, such as GoNoodle or Class Dojo. Finally, the best thing about mindfulness is that teachers do not have to be experts in it to participate with

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their students. If teachers understand how to do the practice, they can try it with their students and grow with them. Sharing this experience with them and learning with them is a great way to bond with their students and teachers can watch them grow in their social and emotional development.

Conclusion

So how does implementing mindfulness impact an elementary student's mental health? Mindfulness provides children with a safe space to reflect on their own body and mind and how they are feeling moment-to-moment. It allows children to develop self regulation skills, so that when they realize a strong emotion is taking over their thoughts, they know exactly how to ride the emotion they are feeling until it settles. They are given the tools they need to calm and refocus their bodies when they are in the classroom after recess and lunch. They are able to express how they are feeling to their classmates and teachers and remember to take a breath and think before they say something that could be hurtful to one of their friends or classmates.

Teachers have the resources they need to implement mindfulness in their classrooms. Now with things like Google a simple web search leads them to engaging and helpful strategies to present mindfulness within their own classroom. However, it is on the teacher whether or not they believe that mindfulness really is benefiting their students, and if they are willing to practice it within their own lives. It is not something that can be learned once, it is something that both the students and teachers practice together every single day. This way, both the students and their teachers are able to grow together, by using mindfulness in their classroom. Implementing

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mindfulness in their classroom today will help their students and themselves handle whatever challenges tomorrow brings them.

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Appendix A

Mindfulness Teacher Survey & Interview Questions

- 1) Do you believe that mindfulness promotes the mental health of your students?
 - a) Yes
 - b) No
- 2) How do you notice your students' mental health benefiting from your mindfulness practice in the classroom? Briefly explain:
- 3) Before using mindfulness techniques for an extended period my students' mental health seemed to be:
 - a) Excellent
 - b) Good
 - c) Fair
 - d) Poor
 - e) Not Sure
- 4) After using mindfulness for an extended period I noticed my students' mental health seemed to be:
 - a) Excellent
 - b) Good
 - c) Fair
 - d) Poor
 - e) Not Sure
- 5) What is the main reason you use mindfulness in the classroom?

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- a) Calm students down if they have high energy
- b) Emotional/Social development
- c) Help students work on being aware of emotions, thoughts, and feelings
- d) In order to help students focus
- e) In order to help students relieve stress
- f) More than one (Please list which ones if there are multiple Ex. 2, 3, 4)
- g) Other (please go into a little detail about what you use it for)

6) In what ways do you think mindfulness helps your students the most?

- a) Relieve stress before test taking
- b) Be more aware of their emotions, thoughts, and feelings
- c) Student focus
- d) Promote empathy between peers
- e) Promote mental well-being
- f) Provide a calm environment for the students
- g) Other/Multiple reasons; explain here:

7) What is the most noticeable change in your classroom since implementing mindfulness?

8) Do you believe that mindfulness helps relieve the stress of test taking for your students?

- a) Yes
- b) No

9) Do you feel that you can easily implement mindfulness into your everyday routine?

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a) Yes

b) No

10) Where do you get your resources to implement mindfulness in your classroom? (Please be specific if it is a book, mention which book, if it is a website please list the website)

11) Do you think there are enough resources available for teachers that any teacher could implement mindfulness into their classrooms?

a) Yes

b) No

12) Have you had any professional development regarding using mindfulness in your classroom? If yes, could you tell me more about that?

a) Yes

b) No

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Appendix B

Calming Corner

